

Noreen Shanfelter: Effecting Change through Art in West Philadelphia

Tracy Hawkins 17 September 2015

As the University City Arts League (UCAL), a community arts and education center in West Philadelphia, approaches its 50th anniversary, Executive Director Noreen Shanfelter looks back on the last five years with pride. During her tenure, UCAL's budget has grown 56%, the board is more diverse and engaged than ever and grants have tripled.

UCAL was founded in 1965 by a handful of West Philadelphia artists, art lovers and interested neighbors who purchased a semi-detached four-story Victorian twin at 4226 Spruce Street. Within two years, the group attained nonprofit status, and began offering classes and programs. This spirit of innovation and commitment to creativity is still alive at the Arts League today.

While their programs have changed with the times, UCAL remains true to their original vision of bringing art to the community by providing a welcoming space for people of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy the arts. Capoeira and yoga classes now outnumber more traditional dance classes (capoeira is a Brazilian martial art that combines

acrobatics, music and dance). Art programs include graphic design and other computer-based classes. The UCAL gallery regularly features exhibits of some of the most exciting local artists and craftspeople. A thriving after-school program and summer camp have made them the go-to spot for children's programming for many families. As a result, some 7,000 students each year, from tots to older adults, experience the arts through UCAL programs.

For most of its life, UCAL was run by its volunteer board of directors with an office manager scheduling classes, taking registration and performing other administrative tasks. When they were hiring their first professional executive directors (EDs), the board-staff relationship had not yet developed into a good balance, which resulted in both the first and second EDs' leaving in short order.

Eight years ago, as an area resident, Noreen Shanfelter became involved in UCAL when she was asked to serve on the board, and she eventually became its president. Upon the departure of the second ED, it was decided that Noreen, having served as president, could take on the executive director's position since she had secured the respect of the board she had served on for two years.

The program that may be dearest to Noreen's heart is the outreach to the underserved populations of West Philadelphia. Thousands of people have been touched by UCAL programs annually. Teachers of arts classes have

engaged participants in poetry, pottery, drawing and painting at the Living Independently for Elderly (LIFE) program, the Jane Addams House for the Homeless of the Lutheran Settlement and the Henry Lea and Samuel Powel schools.

At LIFE, Arts League poets and artists teach several classes a week to the infirm elderly. Students range from their 70s to well into their 90s. A recent poetry class culminated with the publication of a book of the seniors' poetry and a lively poetry reading. At Jane Addams House, preschoolers draw, cut shapes and do pre-reading under the nurturing eye of an Arts League teacher while their moms attend classes of their own.

At the Powel School at 36th and Lancaster, where some 90% of children are economically disadvantaged, the Arts League has run a weekly after-school arts program for three years and worked during the school day with the entire student body on a Central American art project. At the Lea School at 47th and Locust Streets, UCAL is leading after-school capoeira classes for children in kindergarten through grade three. The school students are particularly in need because the struggling SDP cannot support such activities.

Born in West Philadelphia and a resident for more than 40 years, Noreen was first drawn to the arts as a child, taking ballet for many years until an injury prevented her from continuing. Following her graduation from St. Bonaventure

as a journalism/English double major, she studied literature in graduate school, before being hired as a reporter by the Associated Press in Philadelphia.

She worked for a number of years at the Housing Development Association of the Delaware Valley, an esteemed housing advocacy organization. This was a time of conflict in both South Philadelphia and the Northeast as African American families faced a hostile reception when they attempted to move into historically white communities. The agency aggressively pursued the end of "red-lining" of city neighborhoods, under which some financial institutions would not give mortgages in those neighborhoods. Red-lining was linked to the growing housing abandonment in the city as owner occupants moved away and new residents were unable to secure mortgages. During this time, Noreen worked closely with the agency's board chair, W. Wilson Goode, who played an important role in her professional career.

Eventually Noreen moved into nonprofit communications as a spokesperson, first for United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, and later for the national office of Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Her tenure with each organization was punctuated by her serving as the face of the organization during times of crisis. While at the United Way, funding for organizations engaged in family planning came under fire with allegations of the influence of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. It was not long after this that Mayor Goode asked Noreen to join him as a special

assistant in the second half of his first term as mayor. Noreen spent four years in City Hall as a special assistant to the mayor, joining the administration just months after the MOVE bombing. In addition to crisis communications, Noreen worked on projects including privatizing city services, the early creation of the Center City District and helping to articulate the administration's position in union negotiations.

After leaving City Hall, Noreen joined the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation as Vice President of Communications. She was directly involved in promoting projects that showcased the economic development policy of then-Mayor Ed Rendell, including early development of the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard and the Avenue of the Arts project.

As Director of Media and Public Relations at the national office of Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Noreen helped shape the organization's response to the controversy that arose when the conservative Christian group Focus on the Family took aim at the organization for allowing gay mentors in the program. Focus on the Family's vast radio networks urged callers to bombard their local Big Brothers/Big Sisters agencies with calls to rescind the policy, which resulted in the overwhelming and shutting down the systems at some of the local offices.

In addition to the outreach programs mentioned above, during Noreen's service to the organization, UCAL has

expanded its programs to include classes at the Walnut Street West Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia, St. Mary's Nursery School. The very popular after-school program has expanded in both the number of students served (225 a week versus 10 per week just 10 years ago) and the program offerings themselves. A whole new set of classes designed to attract older students in graphic design and programming has resulted in the retention of many students. In response to a request for programming on days when the public schools close early for parent-teacher conferences, a half-day art program was developed to address the need.

Not only has the programming at UCAL developed and grown, so has the organization's infrastructure. Considerable effort has gone into developing the board, and funding was sought to cover the cost of consultants to assist in developing a business and resource development plan that will guide the organization's expansion for the next three years. An online registration system was implemented, and a new website design launched in the fall of 2014. The more than 100-year-old facility now has a third art room and a computer lab, supported by foundation funding.

Although Noreen's background was specifically in communications, she welcomed the challenge to lead an organization. With a style she describes as collegial, she acknowledges that working for a small community organization is very different from a group like the United

Way or Big Brothers/Big Sisters. For one thing, the executive director is responsible for everything, not just communications. If there is a question about budget, programming, facilities, fundraising, planning, staffing—and that leak in the bathroom—it all comes down to the ED.

Noreen's most valuable professional life experience that has helped her in her role at UCAL was working at United Way with a high-powered board of volunteer leaders. There were times that the staff might work to achieve a goal, but they would not be able to take the final steps until one of those influential leaders made a phone call or nudged a decision-maker to ensure success. Particularly when working with funders, Noreen has learned the value of contacts and volunteer leadership support.

Some may ask: Why the arts, when there is a need for social services throughout the community? Noreen believes that the arts are a social service; that the arts can be an agent for change and bring about growth. Moreover, the arts and traditional social service organizations are working more closely than ever now, as evidenced by the relationship between UCAL and the LIFE program and other organizations that serve those in need.

When asked who she looks to for inspiration, Noreen runs through a list of great writers, thinkers and organizers. But she mentions the late Peggy Amsterdam, who passed away in 2009, as someone who made a real difference in

the Philadelphia arts scene. "She put the Philadelphia Cultural Alliance on its feet," Noreen says. "She left the arts and culture world in a much better place." Ms. Amsterdam was President of the Philadelphia Culture Alliance from 2009 until her death.

As Noreen prepares to retire as Executive Director, she looks to her legacy of leaving the Arts League on firmer financial footing, with a strong presence in the community and, lastly, of having board members who sought to serve rather than being sought.

What does she see for the future of the Arts League? She expects that in keeping with the recently developed business plan, UCAL will continue to grow as a hub of arts activity for young and old, individuals and groups, and will continue to bring the arts to those who need and want them.

About the Author: Tracy Hawkins is an executive assistant at Penn and a graduate student in the Fels Institute for Government's Nonprofit Leadership Program. She has also been an actress, director, producer and crew member in various Delaware Valley community theaters over the last 25 years.